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AUTHOR Merrick, Joann; McCreery, Kathleen; Brown, Jim
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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines ways to promote student success in a California standards-based system. It reviews the history of social promotion and retention in the United States and suggests why it is time to move beyond the "either/or" mindset. The booklet suggests that neither social promotion nor retention solves the basic problem of students' lack of success, and although retention may be appropriate in certain individual circumstances, it is not likely that repeating students will receive different curricular offerings or instructional approaches. The debate concerning social promotion versus retention must also be viewed in the context of accountability. Students must be expected to produce high-quality work, and teachers should develop lessons that engage students in powerful learning experiences. When establishing an effective, standards-based system of public education, it is necessary to identify approaches and use them so that students can successfully progress through school with their age-appropriate peers. Ways in which students meet standards cannot be separated from issues of teacher expertise, professional development, curricular alignment, assessment, school organization, and funding. Changes in classroom practice and reorganization of schools are not enough; the entire school community must support schools in new ways. (RJM)

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SPECIAL REPORT

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STUDENT SUCCESS IN A STANDARDS-BASED SYSTEM: MOVING BEYOND SOCIAL PROMOTION AND RETENTION

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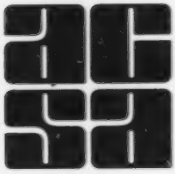
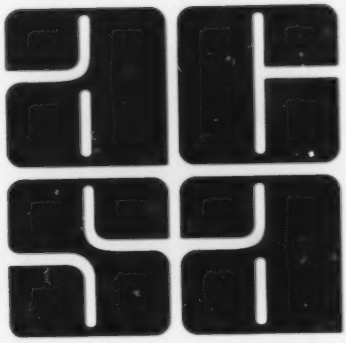


Student Success in a Standards-Based System: Moving Beyond Social Promotion and Retention

A Position Paper of
The Association of California
School Administrators

September 1998



This position paper was written by Joann Merrick, assistant superintendent of Glendale Unified School District, Kathleen McCreery, director of education services for the Temple City Unified School District, and Jim Brown, superintendent of Glendale Unified School District.

It was adopted by the ACSA Board of Directors in June 1998. The data used to draft the position paper was provided by the ACSA Delegate Assembly, Board of Directors, charter presidents, and chairs of the Elementary Education, Middle Grades, Secondary Education, Superintendency and Curriculum, Instruction and Evaluation Committees.

OVERVIEW

The challenge of helping all California students meet high standards sometimes appears to be a daunting one. As an organization whose mission focuses on the importance of student achievement, ACSA believes the challenge can and must be met. However, to do so involves realizing that simplistic solutions will not work. Improving student achievement is incredibly complicated. Only by identifying the major factors that contribute to student achievement, understanding the connections among these factors, and committing to a process of continuous improvement will we be successful.

It should be of concern to us anytime someone proposes a solution to improve student achievement that does not take these considerations into account. Such is the case with current discussion of the issue of promotion and retention. Simply arguing that increased use of retention will improve student achievement does not recognize the complexity of the challenge. Nor does it take into account the research that has been conducted on this issue or answer the very important question: Who is accountable for student success?

In this paper, promoting student success in a standards-based system is examined. First, the issue of promotion and retention is reviewed from an historical perspective. Then, the issue is analyzed in the contexts of research and accountability. Finally, implications for classroom, curriculum, and school organization are considered.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is important to review the history of the use of social promotion and retention in our country to better understand why it is time to move beyond this "either or" mindset. Organizing schools by grade levels is a product of the industrial revolution and mass education beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. This way of organizing schools was developed to handle large numbers of students efficiently. From the beginning, there has been an unresolved issue: how to determine if students should advance to the next grade. Should movement be based solely on academic performance or should other social or emotional factors be considered?

Shepard and Smith (1989) found that the emphasis on social promotion or retention has varied markedly across the history of public schooling in the United States. The educational pendulum has swung between these two policy approaches to student failure, reflecting the political and reform climate of the particular era. In the 1800s rates of grade repetition were extremely high, affecting as many as 70 percent of all students in one year. In the twentieth century, educators believed multiple factors needed to be considered when determining if a student should advance to the next grade. Retention based solely on academic achievement ignored the potential negative effect on students' social and emotional development. The term "social promotion" was used to describe situations when a student was advanced to the next grade due to factors other than academic achievement. Such factors include chronological age, physical size, and social or emotional considerations. In the early 1980s, the message about low student achievement in "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) motivated many districts to pass policies requiring retention for students based on one measure – the standardized test score. When research studies indicated in the late 1980s that student achievement of retained students was not improved compared to students with similar reading scores who were socially promoted, many districts rescinded retention policies.

Recent information on the achievement of our students and the demand for accountability has once again raised

the cry to keep students in their current grade until they master the standards. ACSA believes it is time to recognize that neither social promotion nor retention solves the basic problem of students' lack of success. Neither require a change in pedagogy, content and curriculum. Neither examine the underlying reasons why a student fails to meet standards.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Perhaps no topic in public education suffers more from a greater divide between the views of the public and the findings of the researchers. On the one hand, some state leaders and educators opine that:

- "We will require students in grades 1–4,7 and 10 who are not performing at grade level to take remedial classes in language arts, math, science and history. If they're not up to standard after taking those classes, they don't advance to the next grade. By doing this we change and save lives." (Governor Pete Wilson, State of the State Address 1998)

- "Because of social promotion, we have some students who are three, four or fives years below grade level." (Compton Unified School District's state administrator Randolph E. Ward, 1998)

On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of research on retention practices published during the past twenty years has found no positive effects on student achievement:

- "Those educators who retain pupils at grade level do so without valid research evidence." (Teachers College Record, 1986)

- "Neither social promotion nor retention is an adequate response to student underachievement in large measure because neither requires change in pedagogy, content or curriculum." (American Federation of Teachers, 1997)

- "Few practices in education have such overwhelming negative research findings arrayed against them." (House, 1989)

Estimates place the annual retention level rate in the United States at 7 percent to 9 percent. Grade retentions have also been found to increase dropout rates. Students retained for one year increase in likelihood of becoming drop outs by 40 percent to 50 percent. A second retention increases this risk by 90%. (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997) In addition, there is significant cost to the state whenever a child is retained. This cost has been estimated at $5,028 per student nationally (Dyer & Binkney, 1995).

Retention is a decision with no general educational benefit for large groups of students. Although it may be appropriate to consider in certain individual circumstances, it is not likely students will receive different curricular offerings or instructional approaches in the classroom where they recently experienced failure. The benefits seem to be mainly political and the cost to the state could be better used to provide alternative support systems for at-risk students. The next step in establishing an effective, standards-based system of public education is to identify those alternatives and use them so that students can successfully progress through school with their age-appropriate peers.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The debate concerning social promotion versus retention must also be viewed in the context of accountability. In schools that are organized around achievement of high standards by all students, each party – school staff, parents, students – who contributes to that achievement is held accountable for results.

A standards-based system will work best when all parties to student achievement recognize and accept their accountability. Making one group accountable, while exonerating others, will not produce the intended results. For each group there must be identified consequences when responsibilities are not met.

Students must be expected to produce high quality

work. Similarly, teachers are expected to develop lessons that engage students in powerful learning experiences that lead to the achievement of standards. Lessons that do not produce such results must be re-examined and changes made as needed. Administrators are expected to motivate and challenge staff and students to produce their best work. They strive to provide a safe, nurturing learning environment, focus everyone on powerful teaching and learning, mobilize all available resources, and build relationships that form a learning community. Parents must help their children value achievement and provide a supportive learning environment in the home; they must become full partners in the education of their children. Lack of effort and failure to accept accountability should result in clearly defined consequences for all parties.

THE CHALLENGE

The next step in establishing an effective, standards-based system of public education is to identify approaches and use them so that students can successfully progress through school with their age-appropriate peers. If standards are to be the vehicle of real improvement in student achievement, they must be tied to a system of resources that allows schools and districts flexibility to make changes. With the latest research on teaching and learning, it is time to aggressively pursue creative approaches in order to restructure schools to avoid student failure. It is folly to believe that the working habits of a lifetime can be changed without investing in training, coaching, and supporting educational professionals. It would be equally foolish to believe that academically troubled students can be brought up to the necessary level without investing time, attention, and resources to support accelerated growth.

Issues of how students meet standards cannot be separated from issues of teacher expertise, professional development, curricular alignment, assessment, school organization, and funding. Efforts aimed at supporting continuous progress for all students so they can progress through school with age-appropriate peers must include

changes in all of these areas. These efforts must recognize individual differences among students and provide a variety of educational paths. First and foremost, the variable effecting student progress is the quality of the teacher (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). Teachers must be provided time to plan, work together, and participate in professional development opportunities. It is essential curriculum is aligned with the California state standards and assessment system. School practices such as traditional grade levels, subjective grading, and the time students spend in school must be re-examined. Only by addressing these issues can we hope to ensure that all students have access to the conditions needed for them to succeed.

The search for alternative approaches to assist students to succeed has begun. Districts are experimenting with a variety of practices such as multi-age grouping, multi-year assignment to the same teacher (looping), early intervention programs, preschool programs, mandatory summer school and intersession programs, improving instructional strategies, personal intervention plans for students, expanding class size reduction, one-on-one tutoring, and before and after school programs. These innovations must be monitored for their effectiveness and their best practices should be disseminated in the educational community. Stakeholders in the education of children must make informed choices about the use of limited financial and personnel resources.

The means to ensuring student success is systemwide change around a commitment to all students succeeding. Changes in classroom practice and reorganization of schools are not enough. The entire school community must support schools in new ways. The responsibilities of all parties in the educational process must be clearly defined, with consequences for failure to comply. The question is not, "Do we retain or promote?" — but rather, "How might we rethink our work to assure that all students achieve standards?" The conversation is under way at the school and district levels but must be expanded to involve all stakeholders. How do we redesign the educational system to assure everyone is held accountable for student success? How can the

educational system become more flexible so students receive timely, individualized assistance? How do we provide teachers, administrators, and support staff the professional development needed to support success for all students? These are the critical questions and challenges which must be addressed so that all students succeed in a standards-based system.

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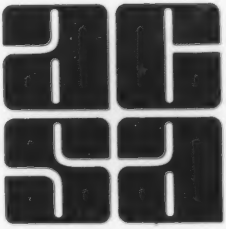

Association of California
School Administrators
1517 L Street
Sacramento, CA 95814
www.acsa.org